

Phyllis Gilliam, Sunday's Best Boutique

Interviewed by Laurie Stern at Sunday's Best, St. Paul, June 28, 2012

Q Where did you grow up?

A Here in Frogtown. Well, I came up here when I was 15.

Q From where?

A Kansas City, MO

Q So you remember Kansas City?

A Yeah, I kind of remember somewhat of it.

Q Do you have people there still?

A Oh yeah. We are from a large family. My mother came up here with 12 children looking for a better place.

Q Is this a better place?

A Well, at the time it was kind of what we was running from. But yeah, it's getting better. Matter of fact this area...my mother was one of the ladies that marched up and down...

Q So now start by saying who you are and where we are and what goes on here.

A Well, my name is Phyllis Gilliam and our business is Sunday's Best Boutique. We are the owners – my husband and I, Pastor Gilliam. And we are at 601 University Avenue. We do formal wear; we do clothing for church, weddings, parties, prom. You name it, we're here.

Q How's business?

A Oh, it's been kind of slow lately. But the prom, I mean weddings...people are getting married so they've been...the wedding dresses and the formals have been doing good.

Q How was prom season?

A It was pretty good. It could have been better.

Q How do you describe this building that you're in? To me it's new. Didn't the police used to be here?

A Well, yes, it was the police station, before that the Belmont. There were so many different things that were here before.

Q It was a strip club at one time, right?

A Oh yeah. My mother was one of the ladies that walked and marched. Matter of fact they had an article in the paper about that because she was one of the ladies that marched; she and the neighborhood women to try to make this neighborhood a better place for her twelve children. But now she's gone on to be with the Lord. She didn't get a chance to see what she did, you know? The progress of this community. The library's over there and now this new development – Frogtown Square – beautiful senior citizens upstairs and down here is just a little strip mall and it's wonderful.

Q Wow! I thought it was a sweet place with air conditioning and now you have all this history about it. Could you just back up for people who don't know? I remember when this intersection was... you avoided it. So back up and tell about your mom and the old days....

A Like I said we came from Kansas City and the neighborhood...she owned a big, beautiful home in Kansas City but just around the corner it was prostitution, drugs and alcohol and clubs and things like that. But when we came here, she bought another big, beautiful house over there on St. Anthony. And at the time we were on 913 St. Anthony but this neighborhood here – the same thing: drugs and strip joints and prostitution. And the reason why my mom got involved is because one day we woke up and it was a john had been stabbed in the car right on the corner of Milton and St. Anthony. And that's when she got involved and her and some of the ladies got some cardboard out and some sticks and marched up and down saying they're not going to take it no more and tried to do away with the activity because they felt that it was coming from this intersection here. The Faust – and there's the library over there – and the Belmont and there's this beautiful new development here.

Q All right. So go on, please, and tell us about this building you're in and how you came to locate here.

A Well, I was down the street at 459 University and kind of hidden in a little Kim Hung Mall. A lot of people thought it was Chinese-owned, but it was me. So I didn't get a lot of business. So I appreciated when I passed by and seen that they were putting a new development here and when I was interested in it I called the Neighborhood Development Center and they told me they were full. But I prayed and I felt like the Lord said that this was where he was going to bless me. And low and behold God is a God who keeps his promises and about a month – maybe not even a month – they had a vacancy and they called me. And they said, are you still interested? And I said, I sure am. And I went through the classes with the Neighborhood Development Center, the entrepreneur classes and the rest is history. They gave me the money that I needed. A lot of those days I was the type of woman that I didn't know everything but I tried to do everything myself and they just helped me dot the "i's" and cross the "t's." Stuff that I didn't really realize that it took to run a business.

Q So sounds like you could be a story in yourself, but our assignment is about University Avenue. So what was it about this part of town that made you want to be here?

A Well, I have a heart for the community and a vision for the people, I guess. And the reason why I say a heart for the community because I was raised in this community.

And a vision for the people to be a role model for they can see that we as African American people can own their business and be successful in it. You know, just being a role model but not just for the African Americans, but for the community in general. Because sometimes we don't see good role models in the black community, you know? So I just wanted to be...got a heart for the people and for the community. That's a vision that we have. Our church is right down the street. They're on University and my husband that's his goal is to try and do an impact. Because mega does not mean something big, but it's the impacting one does in their community and that's what we want to do. We want to be a positive influence for this community. Frogtown could be God's town. That's what we say. I know I'm talking about God, but that's, he's my Lord and my Savior.

Q Your mother would be so proud.

A And I know she's smiling down. Matter of fact I've got a picture of her back there. Right now that purple dress is kind of hiding her a little, but I carry her everywhere I go, you know? And she would...she's been gone now for 20-some years but she'll be so happy with the way her children turned out. Most of us got our own business or got degrees and master's degrees and stuff like that and went to school and made something and have added to society and not taken from it. So she'll be proud.

Q That's her doing, too.

A Yeah, oh yeah. Nobody but her and her prayers. I always say I still feel Mama's prayers. It was a blessing to have a mother that...she raised us by herself in this community because her and my dad had separated and so she was...I can hear her now in the kitchen sometime, not having enough to feed all of her children. Singing and moaning, stirring the pot, and I have seen one little pack of beans multiply and feed us and the neighbor's kids. So I thank God for the type of upbringing that my mother did impart in her children.

Q And to the extent that University is the heart of the community, how has it changed in the time? It's still rough in places, right?

A It is.

Q Could you describe it then and now?

A Back then we were forbidden to come over here on this corner, you know? My mother...because there was a hairdresser over there where Big Daddy's...I forget the name of it. I think it was Shear Pleasure or something like that, but we used to get our hair done there. So my mother used to tell us, you go up St. Anthony, come down and do not talk to nobody. Go get your hair done and come right back home. So the community now...you would see prostitutes on the corner, johns walking around trying to pick up the women – not only the ladies on the street, they would try to pick up young girls thinking that every woman that walked down University was someone that's working on University. Now, you still see a little of that. You see some crime in this community, but back then...well, back then I didn't see people get shot. That's one thing. And I have seen young guys shooting, so I think this community still has a lot of work to do. And it's going to take the people in the community. My mother always said it takes the whole village to raise a child and sometimes their mothers, other people's parents, are

not doing their job, you know? And a lot of the people that come into this community don't even live in this community. They come in here just to store stuff, I don't know.

Q Do you still live in the community?

A No I don't because I have nine children and I'm very...how can I put it? I try to keep my children in a...they say I shelter them or try to keep them in a...not closed in. I don't even know how to put it. They tell me I'm too strict or whatever, but now I've just got one at home. All of them...she's in college to be a doctor, he just graduated...and I'm trying to just show them the better part of life and keep them from things that I think is negative. And I'm not saying this community is negative, but I'm just saying I didn't want them to have any influences that would cause them to go down a path that I didn't want them to go down.

Q So where do you live? Suburbs?

A I owned a home on the east side at first and then that neighborhood kind of got rough and I sold that. And I just chose to move in a more quiet, somewhere that my children could just well, be safe. I just wanted them to be around a community that I felt is safe for them and not one that's going to be pulling them to negative stuff. Because I think everybody, probably almost everybody on our block is retired and they're old and they just take care of their yard and walk their dog and you know sometimes I don't even lock my door so.... They don't like living in the suburbs. They were raised in the suburbs. I was raised here but I have never stayed here in Frogtown.

A Well, I want to say that maybe when this is published it may be over – the construction – because I was going to say the people in the community...I know the traffic and all the mess out here is kind of, is detouring them to go to some other place. But support your local business and the community because right now we need you because we want the community to grow, not deteriorate while they're trying to build it up.

Q And how's it been for your business?

A We feel it, but I think that it's still, we still have people coming in because people are getting married...